

Interim Chief John Diaz Statement
Increasing Safety in Downtown Seattle
March 17, 2010

Improving safety in downtown Seattle is a high priority of the Seattle Police Department. We appreciate the work of the Council and Public Safety Committee Chair Tim Burgess in pursuing this shared goal.

Police departments across the nation continue to struggle to provide a basic sense of safety throughout the communities they serve. Insecurity and even fear can be rooted in specific and recordable criminal behavior or based upon individual perception. Councilmember Burgess's Aggressive Solicitation Ordinance seeks to address some common fears held by those who live, work in or visit Seattle.

Another best practice by police departments across the country to address concerns about behavior and civility is to increase police visibility and presence. Foot beats are the most effective way to deter the sorts of behavior that can negatively affect our quality of life.

I am happy to report today that, at Mayor McGinn's direction, we will begin a pilot effort in downtown Seattle beginning on April 1st to redeploy some of our proactive bicycle patrols to foot beats. These foot beats will cover Belltown, Pioneer Square and the International District. It is my hope to make our police officers more accessible to citizens, businesses and the public at large. We are doing this within our existing budget, recognizing the City's current financial constraints.

If feedback from community leaders and stakeholders on this pilot program is positive, then it could be replicated anywhere in the city where bicycle officers are currently assigned. We will also review other ways within our budget constraints to get more foot patrols on the street.

Dealing specifically with aggressive panhandling also has a role in providing a greater sense of safety. Seattle is a compassionate and generous city, but intimidating conduct of any kind is unacceptable. We hope that Councilmember Burgess' ordinance will encourage better behavior, without penalizing lawful conduct.

We understand that there are those who have concerns regarding this ordinance. Mayor McGinn himself has raised some questions.

In the interest of service and fairness to all, we will ensure that every officer on the Seattle Police Department receives training on the ordinance before they will be authorized to enforce it. A grace period of warnings and an education campaign will precede the first issuance of infraction tickets. Infractions and arrests that result from a failure to pay will be tracked and audited. Additionally, officers will provide information on how to access social services to individuals cited for this behavior in the hopes of eliminating repeat offenses.

We will continue to work collaboratively with the Mayor and Councilmember Burgess to determine whether or not the ordinance meets its intended goals.

We would also propose that Council revisit issues related to the enforcement and effectiveness of the ordinance one year after implementation. For example, the Council may consider a sunset clause, or calling for a report after the first year.